

honorable mention, fiction

Dovie Mae

by Carol Gilson

When I knew her, she had aqua eyes framed by large, out of fashion octagonal lenses that dominated her face. She had pale, crepey skin and thinning gray hair that she sometimes hid under a wig which never sat quite right on her head. At times, one ear showed more than the other, and sometimes, she had a more pronounced forehead. At others, the bottom of her hairstyle would become the top. I was looking through an old shoebox full of family photos one day when it occurred to me that my Grandmother might be someone besides the woman I knew. Looking into those black and white images, I realized that she once had fire in her belly, and her heart had been alive with hope, her sharp mind churning with possibilities, dreams, and aspirations. This revelation was interrupted by one of my aunts. She looked in my direction to ask the room full of my female relations, "Y'all think she gone be like her momma and gran-momma-hot blooded?" I was too young to have any idea what "hot-blooded" meant, but I peered into that photo searching for the answer. I didn't much look like her, but I recognized something eerily familiar.

A red clay back road wound up the hill leading to the white clapboard house. It was a hot summer afternoon, and the air vibrated with the sound of cicadas.

She stood beside the big, baby blue 50's Ford truck, the only new automobile my grandparents ever owned. She posed seductively, one hand resting on the side-mounted spare tire, the other hand on her hip. They were newly-weds when he took the picture with his Brownie camera. Behind her was the house where they would build their new life together and in the distance, a thicket of piney woods where one day, their children and grand-children would run and play.

She had a smoldering sexiness about her, a flicker of passion in her eyes, reserved for her strong, hard-working new husband. She flashed a carefree and radiant smile, showing a side of her I never knew existed. She was wearing that yellow dress.

Everyone in that tiny Texas town where she had lived her whole life knew this woman as Dovie Mae. She spoke with a voice in a lower register than most women, had raven pin-curved hair, alabaster skin, full ruby red lips, and crystal blue eyes. Dovie Mae was desirable to most men she met, but she had a secret. On a cold-cold night, when she was a little girl, she stood next to the fireplace her family used for heat. Mesmerized by the flickering light, she didn't notice that she had gotten too close; her nightgown went up in flames. She was badly burned. The blaze caused the flesh on her belly to melt.

As the scar tightened with age, it began to dominate her torso, moving her belly button far to one side, and consuming most of one breast, even the nipple.

When she started to fill out, her momma gave her a pretty handkerchief to fill in her bra on that side. It wasn't long before she wrapped the handkerchief around a pair of stockings to fill the space. The night before her wedding, Dovie Mae made a pillow out of that handkerchief so that she could keep her

momma close to her heart, since she would not be living in the loving comfort of her momma's house again.

These days, her life consists of all the duties she wished she didn't have to do for her husband. She is his wife, not his nursemaid. He refuses to look at what remains of his leg. He hasn't looked her in the face either, not since the first time she changes the bandage on the stump that was his left leg.

She can't stand to look at it. The stitched up mass of oozing flesh looks more like the end of a sausage than a man's leg. It smells of camphor and cancer.

She waits until he is in a medicated fog, which makes changing the bandage easier for both of them. She accidentally brushes the fine hairs of his right thigh. Dovie Mae can't help but see his erection. She knows it's not particularly for her, but she moves toward him. His manhood in her hands, she is reminded of his strength, but for the first time, she senses his vulnerability. It frightens, repulses, and intrigues her. His opaline blue eyes are fixed on the ceiling.

Dovie Mae, missing the closeness they once shared, searches his face for a spark of hope that their life would somehow be normal again. She thought to herself, "He's been such a good daddy ta them babies, an' was such a hard workin' man." She loved him with her whole heart. He deserves this, their marriage deserves this. She convinced herself of that as she lifted her skirt, shimmied out of her panties, unbuckled both her shoes, and climbed over his body.

She was careful to breathe through her mouth, in an effort to avoid the smell of antiseptic and death. She teetered off balance, doing her best to straddle the unoccupied space that was his leg. She was surprised to find herself off kilter. His body had always been so strong and able to support her, there to meet her when she needed him; but now, she struggled to remain upright.

Dovie thought back to how he'd been so good to her when her nerves were shot after the wedding, and she left her momma's house. She remembered how he combed her hair, dressed her before he left for work; he even put lipstick on her, because he knew how much she cared about her looks. He took care of her again.

After the first baby was born. He even got up with the little thing, and tenderly put its tiny mouth to her one motherly breast. When Dovie didn't come back around, and time finally came for her to go away to "rest," he dressed her in her favorite yellow dress. She always liked to look nice when she went

into town, and this trip would be the farthest she'd ever gone. He packed her bag and carried her to the truck, laid the baby on the seat between them, so he could tend to it if it cried. Now she cared for her husband with the same love and attention he had given her when she needed it. He was worth that much.

Motionless, he stared at the ceiling, breathing irregularly as she relived him of his burden. She hungered for more. She felt empty inside and further away from him now than she ever had before. She began to

roll off of him with tears in her eyes. As he stirred from his fog, he grabbed her arm and looked at her face for the first time since coming home without his leg. His eyes were like daggers, and with venomous hate, he lashed out at her, "You ain't nothin' but a dirty hussy. I won't have you messin' with me like that no more! You hear!" Flinging her arm, he yelled, "Now, get!"

Dovie ran out of the house into the colle shade of the woods; she kept running as fast as her feet would carry her. Falling onto a pile of pine needles, she cried until there were no tears left. Feeling wrung out like a rag, she collected herself and went back to the house, so she could start supper. Standing at the kitchen sink, she splashed water on her face. Her eyes were tender to the touch, swollen from crying. Catching a shadowy glimpse of herself in the window, she thought to herself, "There ain't no way that man meant all that he said; he's just eaten up with hate over losing that leg to cancer."

After the kids were fed, clean, and in their beds, Dovie was exhausted. She opened the door leading to the bedroom that she shared with her husband. Slowly, trying not to wake him, she carefully lifted the sheet. "I done told you woman. You ain't welcome here no more," he hissed. "Baby, just let me hold you,"

she pleaded. He slapped her across the face. It had been so long since she had seen him use his hands that she had almost forgotten how big and strong they were. Stunned, she stood frozen, looking at this man- this stranger.

The next morning, Dovie Mae dipped into their dwindling savings and drove into town to buy a bed; she had it set up in the baby's room. One of the men who delivered the bed was Fix-It Man. He came back to the house a few days later to see Dovie and told her, "I know the old man's been good around the house, I'm just wantin' to do a little work in the yard to keep it lookin' nice." When he finished, the yard looked good. It was so nice to have laughter again and a man working in the fertile soil. She was sad to see his truck go as she watched the cloud of red dust round the corner when he drove away.

She had reason to call Fit-It Man again a couple of weeks later when a pipe under the kitchen sink broke. When the work was done, he turned to her and said, "Dovie, I know things is real hard around here, I won't charge you none if you ride inta town wit' me an' pay for the parts." She felt her cheeks flush and turned to get her purse. When he packed the tools up to leave, she hated to see him go. She insisted that he stay for supper. "It's all I can do ta repay ya for yer trouble," she said. During dinner, a thunderstorm the size of Texas rolled in, and the clay roads were flooded. He stayed well past the time the kids had been put to bed. After that, his truck was parked out there most nights.

The trouble with red clay roads is that the dust settles on everything. One afternoon, Dovie drove into town with her small children to get groceries and morphine for her husband's phantom pains. When she came out of the store with the children, she saw the word "HUSSY" quickly scrawled in the dust on the back window of the Ford. The clear lines of the spiteful letters were the only clean spaces on the glass. She could feel her blood boil. Life hadn't been fair to her. She lived with a man eaten alive by bitterness because his body had betrayed him. No, it wasn't fair that she had three small children to rear herself, everyday dealing with her ticking time bomb of a husband who lived holed up in his room, expecting her

to cater to his every need. Nobody knew what she went through, or the pain she carried in her belly from losing the man she loved to meanness.

She couldn't be driving around town like that, so Dove stopped by her parents' house, just across the tracks from the store. She went straight to the pump.

It was the same old well water that quenched the flames that time when her nightgown caught fire. Fueled by her fury, she put her whole body into working the handle of the old pump; in no time, the bucket was full. She threw the water at the word, washing away the title she had been given, the scorn she'd been shown. Dovie Mae watched as rust colored water ran down the truck and spilled onto the ground. She climbed back into the truck and drove away.